Weapons School graduates experts

By Capt. Kenneth Ekman
USAF Weapons School

Jets roar into the night, their crews eagerly anticipating the coming battle as they mentally review every detail of the impending mission. Overhead, satellites streak along their orbits, feeding data to recipients anxiously awaiting the next set of results. In the operations cell, intelligence officers pore over a cascade of information provided by the satellites, unmanned aerial vehicles, and U-2 reconnaissance aircraft.

While the forces marshal, a mission director aboard an E-3 Sentry to the east of the battle area provides threat data while his aircraft's radar scans the skies for hostile aircraft.

This massive, highly coordinated attack by air and space forces could easily occur on the first night of the nation's next conflict. However, during the first two weeks of December, this attack is typical of those staged by the United States Air Force Weapons School during the Mission Employment phase, the students' final exercise before graduation. Tomorrow the students will graduate as expert instructors and tacticians, taking the knowledge gained from experiences like ME back to the combat air forces.

The students carry with them a wealth of expertise gained by their experiences in the school's eleven divisions. Whereas in the early 1950s the USAFWS curriculum focused on aerial gunnery and flying instruction, the course has expanded to encompass a variety of diverse disciplines, all focused on honing the individual and collective tactical and instructional skills of handpicked course attendees.

The school's courses of instruction include command and control operations, intelligence, space, plus courses specializing in the B-52, B-1, C-130, HH-60, A-10, F-16, F-15E, and F-15C. Within the CCO division, specific students become experts in employing the RC-135, EC-130, or E-3. Additionally, the school is graduating its first Joint Surveillance Target Attack Radar System CCO student.

The class has faced tremendous challenges since it began in July. Students were thrust into a rigorous core academic program designed to lay a foundation of understanding of their own and others' weapons systems and capabilities. After two weeks of core classes and a seemingly endless series of academic tests, the students began studying in earnest in their respective divisions.

For some students, the course required mastery of all weapons system tactics and capabilities versus focusing on a single airframe or mission. In the intelligence division, students are focused on one aircraft then another, as they prepare themselves for their daily briefings and missions. This process allows them to discern through mission planning, execution and post-mission analysis how Air Force assets combat enemy forces.

Capt. Ken Cushing, an intelligence division student, said "We don't come here to learn the threat. We know all that. We attend the Weapons School to gain a weapons and tactics officer's perspective encompassing every airframe and mission, and how those platforms interrelate. That's what we take back to the combat Air Force."

Additionally, intelligence students learned to integrate intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance assets to build the overall battlefield picture. "We had to figure out how to integrate ISR to include JSTARS, AWACS, U-2 and Predator," said Capt Cushing, "ISR is definitely a new buzzword for us."

For space students, the challenge was to master all space mission areas, to include communications, remote sensing, Global Positioning System, theater missile defense, signals intelligence, and space control. Part of studying these areas involved traveling to Washington, D.C., Vandenberg Air Force Base, Calif., and several space operations and control centers near Colorado Springs, Colo.

"On top of that, we become familiar with the combat air forces so that we can better integrate our space capabilities," said Capt. David Meteyer, Weapons School student. "Only a handful of people understand the combat air forces' capabilities, the six space mission areas, and how they all interrelate. As space weapons and tactics officers, we help to bridge the gap between the CAF and space."

As the first JSTARS student to graduate from the school's CCO division, Capt. Alex Koven brought a wealth of experience gained as a JSTARS senior director in Operation Allied Force. He went to Tyndall Air Force Base, Fla., in May to become current in his air weapons officer skills, then participated in the initial air-to-air controller and instructor phases with his classmates.

"It was tough catching up in the air-to-air control realm," Capt. Koven said. "Once I started the JSTARS senior director phase, I was more in my comfort area. It's exciting to work this airplane into the Weapons School because it brings a lot to the fight."

In terms of what he'll contribute when he returns to his home unit, Capt. Koven said, "I'll bring knowledge of the CAF as it stands today. I'll also bring the weapons officer methodology. Among the most important things Weapons School teaches is how to debrief. We focus on what happened, and how we can do it better next time."

Above, Airman 1st Class Brandon Parker, USAF Weapons School crew chief, helped Capt. Steve Jost prepare for take-off during the mission employment phase of the final weeks of class.
Below, HH-60s from the 66th Rescue Squadron lands as an A-10 provides cover. The exercise closely simulates a real-world battle zone as is possible.
Bottom left, one of only a half dozen in the Air Force inventory, the JSTARS aircraft provided command, control and intelligence information to friendly forces during the ME phase of the exercise.

Photos by Ms. Renee Ekman

Above, an A-10 Thunderbolt II strafes a target with its armor-piercing 30mm cannon. The "tank killer" can be armed with a variety of guided and unguided munitions in its unique close-air-support role.

Left, Capt. Alex Koven, weapons school student, and Maj. Ted Davis, instructor, review satellite photos for the upcoming battle.

Below, An F-15C takes on fuel from a KC-135. The ME phase is equivalent to a final exam for the students at the Weapons School. The exercise encompasses more than a dozen airframes including the A-10, F-15, F-16, HH-60, RQ1-A Predator, JSTARS, E-3 Sentry and the U-2 reconnaissance aircraft.